DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 624 CS 509 470

AUTHOR Tolhuizen, James H.

TITLE MUDs, MOOs, MUSHes and More: Using Text-Based Virtual Worlds To Teach Communication.

PUB DATE Nov 96

NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 23-26, 1996).

PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Computer Assisted Instruction; *Computer Mediated Communication; Higher Education; *Internet; *Interpersonal Communication; Online Systems; *Role Playing; Self Concept; Social Psychology; *Student Participation

IDENTIFIERS *MOOs; Technology Integration

ABSTRACT

Multiple-user domains--the most common names are MUDs (Multiple-User Domain), MOOs (Multiple user domain, Object Oriented), and MUSHes (Multiple User Shared Hallucination)--can be effectively used for teaching. While each may be slightly different, they are all interactive internet sights with real time connections and exchanges. Often described as "fantasy games" or "super-chat rooms," multiple user domains are text-based virtual worlds that are easy to use, entertaining, informative, and educationally useful. Most educational multiple user sites have some provision for allowing teachers to bring students on-line. One teacher of interpersonal communication has devised several assignments around multiple-user sites. One requirement of multiple user sites is that users take a name and develop a character or role. Characters evolve slowly as individuals interact with each other. These processes afford an excellent opportunity for students to observe and experience role playing. Beyond characterization and role-taking, social support, repair/rehabilitation, and accounting behavior can be studied. Students may be asked, for instance, to observe the ways users help and support each other in the presentation of their respective identities. A character or role operates like a dynamic story that is situated and made real by the way others respond to the role taker. These instances of social support are particularly interesting in situations where something unexpected or untoward occurs. Multiple user domains are a place where students can try out new behaviors that they may not be fully comfortable with yet. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 405 624

MUDS, MOOS, MUSHES AND MORE:

USING TEXT-BASED VIRTUAL WORLDS TO TEACH COMMUNICATION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Tolhuizen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

James H. Tolhuizen
Department of Communication
Indiana University Northwest
3400 Broadway
Gary, IN 46408
219-980-6678
JTOLH@inuhaw1.iun.indiana.edu

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS509470

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, November 23-26, 1996.

MUDS, MOOs, MUSHES AND MORE:

USING TEXT-BASED VIRTUAL WORLDS TO TEACH COMMUNICATION

This panel, and dozens of others like it over the last few years, is representative of the ways innovative teachers are working to incorporate new technologies in education. Computer technology is a case in point. Not many years ago, most colleges and universities were still struggling to make computer resources widely available to their students and faculty. When this was accomplished, students and faculty had access to word processing, course related software, local e-mail, and gradually, access to internet e-mail. Recently, colleges and universities have gained wide-spread access to the World-Wide Web, and for both students and faculty, the computer has become more than a word processing tool, it has become a gateway for accessing research, information, and data from all parts of the world. These technical changes have challenged teachers to find ways to use these powerful learning resources in their classes. The focus of this paper is the internet, and more specifically a collection of internet sites collectively known as multiple-user domains.

Multiple-user domains have several different names. As reflected in the title of this paper, the most common names are MUDs, MOOs, and MUSHes. Each name has a little different meaning: MUD stands for Multiple-User Domain or Dungeon, MOO stands for Multiple user domain (Object Oriented), and MUSH refers to Multiple User Shared Hallucination. Important differences exist between these forms. MUDs, for instance are fixed in that all aspects of

the domain are controlled by the programmers, while MOOs and MUSHes afford the user with more flexibility in creating rooms, spaces and directing their own experience. Nevertheless, all are interactive internet sites. Multiple user domains are accessed using "telnet" rather than the hypertext transfer protocol (http) so familiar to web browser users. Because telnet opens a direct communications link between the client's computer and the host server, connections to multiple user domains are fully interactive; users can both send and receive messages, information, and data in real time. In addition to real time interaction, many users can access the site simultaneously, and can interact with one another directly. Often described as "fantasy games" or "super-chat rooms," multiple user domains are real time, fully interactive text-based virtual worlds. Many of these are fantastic, others may follow a theme or story or book, and still others have educational and social goals. For instance, Diversity University (telnet>moo.du.org 8888), Media MOO (telnet>purple-crayon.media.mit.edu 8888), College Town (telnet>patty.bvu.edu 7777) and Virtual Online University "VOUMOO" (telnet>brazos.iac.net 8888) are examples of multiple user domains with educational, though not always academic, goals.

Multiple-user domains are relatively easy to use. Though there are slight variations, most use a similar set of commands for speaking, interacting and moving around. For example, lets say a user named Bluebird wanted to say the words, "Hi, how are you?" Bluebird would use the SAY command, simply typing: say Hi, how are you? All other users who were in the same room or space would see

the message, 'Bluebird says, "Hi, how are you?"' Other simple interaction commands include TO (directs a message to a particular individual in the room, though it is said "out loud" and everyone can see it), WHISPER (directs a message to one person only), and EMOTE or POSE (displays some nonspeaking action, e. g., facial expressions, body movements, and other nonverbal gestures). These verbal and nonverbal message types can also be combined to create simultaneous verbal/nonverbal message packages. Finally, moving about multiple-user domains can usually be accomplished by typing in a command in the form of a cardinal direction. Thus the command EXIT WEST takes the user to the room, space, or place directly "west" (in cyberspace) of his or her present location. Alternatively, most multiple-user domains also support some form of "teleporting," which allows users to move quickly from one place to another.

While entertaining, multiple user domains are only beginning to be used as learning vehicles by classroom teachers. Most of the educational multiple user sites listed above have some provision for allowing teachers to bring students online, but be sure you check with the "wizards" or programmers of the particular multiple user domain before doing so. As a teacher of interpersonal communication, I have been devising several assignments for students in my classes. I will outline my thinking in this area, but I encourage you to become familiar with several multiple-user domains, and work to see how you can adapt them to your needs. One aspect of multiple-user domains I find particularly fascinating is

the requirement that users who come online must take a name and develop a character or role. Developing a complete character is not done quickly. Characters evolve slowly over time as individuals interact with one another. These processes afford an excellent opportunity for students to observe and experience the role taking process. I'm particularly thinking now of the language of Erving Goffman and the dramaturgical model. That is, users design and present an acceptable "face" (self) through the use of lines (coordinated actions or messages). One of the really interesting aspects of multiple-user domains is that users can think consciously about the face they want to present and the methods used to present that face. In essence, students can be encouraged to try different selves and learn how to present them.

Beyond characterization and role-taking, social support, repair/rehabilitation, and accounting behavior can also be studied. Ask students, for instance, to observe the ways users help and support each other in the presentation of their respective identities. A character or role operates like a dynamic story which is situated and made real by the way others respond to the role taker. These instances of social support are particularly interesting in situations when something unexpected or untoward occurs (this happens more frequently than might be expected on domains since users' virtual characters are seldom the same as their "real life" self presentations and therefore their virtual self presentations, particularly at the beginning, may be awkward and problematic). Such instances often require users to cooperate

with one another to repair the social context and to rehabilitate the characters who have committed errors and to keep them from losing face. Sensitizing students to these processes affords them an excellent opportunity to observe how accounts of untoward behavior are negotiated.

Another educational goal I have identified for my interpersonal classes is to use multiple-user domains to help students observe relationship development processes. Several communication models of relationship development are discussed in my class. Among these are Charles Berger's uncertainty reduction model, Mark Knapp's staircase model, and Robert Bell and John Daly's affinity-seeking model. Each of these models yields certain predictions about communication in developing relationships. For instance, uncertainty reduction theory predicts that interactors will employ various information acquisition strategies during periods of high uncertainty, and that individuals will prefer to be indirect in their interpersonal espionage before using tactics of direct interaction. In multiple-user domains, students can test these predictions through both the observation of others' behavior and through their own getting acquainted experiences.

Mark Knapp's staircase model, on the other hand, predicts that communicative messages and topics of talk are sequenced both chronologically and functionally as relationships grow and dissolve. Again, multiple-user domains give students the opportunity to observe these processes. For instance, during exploratory communication, one would expect to see a rapid

expansion in the number of topics exchanged between partners as they search for integrating topics and common interests. Such observations can help underscore the role of small talk in relationship growth. Later, we might expect students to experience explorations into more personal topics as the relationship moves toward intensifying communication. Other stages in the relationship development process can be studied in a similar fashion.

Finally, teachers of interpersonal communication frequently struggle to create supportive climates where students can try out new behaviors with which they may not be familiar or comfortable. Again, multiple-user domains may be used for this. A student who would like to practice being more assertive, for instance, can consciously build assertiveness into his or her character, thus "allowing" or giving the student "permission" to act more assertively during virtual interaction with others. While such an assignment should be closely monitored by the instructor, students will become more comfortable with their new behavior as other users come to know their character, expect them to act assertively, and begin to reinforce them for their assertive behavior.

Studies such as the ones outlined above will require that students access the multiple-user domain successively over a period of time so they have the opportunity to build their characters and interact with others repeatedly. I recommend, therefore, that students be given a standing assignment to choose a multiple-user domain and access it at least once or twice a week over the course

of the semester. Secondly, because the virtual "dialogue" on multiple-user domains can be either downloaded or printed out from the terminal, these interaction experiences overcome the ephemerality of face-to-face interactions which is perhaps the greatest weakness of classroom or extra-classroom exercises and interaction experiences as learning tools.

In the above, I have discussed multiple-user domains, a special kind of internet site which offers users real-time interaction in text-based virtual worlds. These sites are remarkably user-friendly and easily accessible by both students and faculty through telnet on most university computing systems. The usefulness of these sites as educational tools in the communication class is extraordinarily rich, but to date have only begun to be explored. I have discussed several of my own ideas for multiple user domains in interpersonal communication classes. Surely, talented teachers will develop even more innovative uses. I invite you to try.